21A.520 Magic, Science, and Religion

Paper 4: Magical Performance

When I started this project, my original plan was to do the trick we learned in class where I figure out what image out of the fifteen red and white images my friend picked. Unfortunately, most of my friends are math/cs majors so when I tried to do this trick on my friend, I was two cards into the trick when he said "this is easy! You're creating a binary number!". (Although in hindsight, I think I said something like "now I will try to read your mind and figure out which image you picked" which I guess gives away the effect before I've done the trick, probably contributing to my failure (Jones 2011)). Because of this, I thought it would be better to do a trick that didn't rely on math and relied more on distraction and presentation considering my audience was likely a math major.

Therefore, for my magic trick, I decided to learn a simple card trick where a person picks a card at random and then I figure out what card they picked. I learned about this trick a long time ago when my brother was very into magic tricks and he showed me this one from one of the "magic tricks for kids" books he bought. Although I was familiar with the mechanism of the trick, I focused on modifying the presentation of the trick so that it would be more convincing and I could distract them from what I was actually doing better. To figure out what worked best, I tried the trick on different people to see what diverted their attention best, and practiced by myself, imagining I was doing the trick on someone. I tried to follow the method described in Jones 2011 where I imagine what a spectator might think or say (and try to eliminate the thoughts that would make the trick less magical like "oh she's just holding the position of my

card in the deck", in order to try to understand what would make the trick more magical. Although I think my trick is still very simple, and I've identified some things the audience could think/say that I haven't really figured out how to work around, (also I'm still very awkward with it), I think some of the changes I decided to make after thinking about the spectator perspective definitely made the trick better.

The mechanism of the trick is very simple; I start with a shuffled deck of cards, and ask someone to pick a card from it without showing me. Then I flip the bottom card of the deck and flip the whole deck over so that it looks like the deck still has all the cards face down (even though only the top one is flipped, and the rest are face up). The card is inserted into the deck at a random point (now it is the only one face down), so it is easy for me to locate since it will be the only one face up.

When I learned this trick originally, you were supposed to flip the bottom card as "setup" before starting the magic trick. I decided to change this and flip the card over in the middle of the trick. I thought this would make the trick more impressive since I could add more to the trick, and give the person more apparent "control", and hopefully dispel the thought that I've rigged the deck in some way. For example, I started by showing the person all the cards, showing that I haven't done anything special to them and that they aren't in any particle order, and after some time, I thought it would be even better to hand them the cards and let them shuffle as much as they wanted. The problem with this was that I had to figure out how to flip the bottom card and the deck without them noticing, while they are watching me (i.e. during the trick instead of as setup). Eventually, especially after realizing how slow and awkward I was when flipping the bottom card over, I thought it would be best to flip the card while my friend had some task to be focusing on themselves (so that their full attention wasn't on me and on what I was doing).

Therefore, I imagined that the best time to flip the card would be right after they pick their card and while I'm telling them to "focus on their card, really ingrain it in your brain, make sure you remember it".

I noticed that this kind of worked when I tried the trick out on my friend (I asked "can I practice my magic trick on you"), at first just to get a sense of how obvious the trick was (since I found it difficult to imagine whether or not it will appear obvious to a spectator when I already know the trick). When I did the trick first time, despite some slowness, I did manage to confuse him, and he asked "wait how did you do it". Because I wasn't too particular about keeping it magical (and because I wanted to practice more), I said I'd do the trick again. When I did the trick the second time, I noticed that he barely looked at the card he picked, and instead he focused directly at what I was doing, and consequently immediately spotted when I flipped the card over. This reaffirmed my guess that I should flip the card when they have something else to focus on (and also that if I really want to trick someone, I shouldn't do it a second time since they will probably shift their focus to try to "catch" me).

In trying to make this magic trick work, I related a lot to how you had to experiment with it, in order to understand how people reacted and what works to move people's attention. I found that when I tried the trick on different people, they tended to focus on different aspects revealing all sorts of "holes" that I needed to cover up. When trying the trick on a different friend, I searched through the cards to find the one that was flipped over and present it as her card when she asked "well why is that the only one flipped?" which made me realize I needed to figure out how to present the finding of the card in such a way that it remained magical (I ended up responding something like "the card flipped over on its own by magic to tell me it was the one you picked"; unfortunately I'm not very good at improvising).

I was also surprised by (as said in the readings) how much problem solving was involved in trying to make the magic trick work. It felt like even in a very simple trick such as mine, they were so many little problems that had to be fixed, either because the trick isn't engaging or surprising enough or because the spectators have the opportunity to do something that could make the trick fail. Finally, I was surprised by how often the trick actually worked on people, especially since I had been imagining all the things they could do/say that could make it go wrong. It surprised how many times people were like "wait how did you do it?".